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QUEER READINGS, HISPANIC WRITINGS



¿Entiendes?

## Oscar Montero

### *Julián del Casal and the Queers of Havana*

By the end of the nineteenth century, the gentle reproaches of cultural patriarch Andrés Bello about the "melindrosa y femenil ternura," [affected, feminine tenderness] and the "arrebatos eróticos," [erotic raptures] of certain writers had paradoxically hardened into the ambiguous aesthetic of *Modernismo*, nurtured on the one hand by the decadent, and often implicitly homoerotic literatures of Europe and North America, and fueled on the other by the none too subtle homophobia of various discourses of national affirmation.<sup>1</sup> In the context of such discourses, founded and developed during the second half of the nineteenth century, the life and works of Cuban *modernista* Julián del Casal constitute a peculiar case. Casal's literary novelty and his position among the first *modernistas* are familiar; what is less clear, although it is a recurring topic among his readers, is Casal's role in the deviant side of a foundational erotics of politics, as Doris Sommer has aptly called it. The pages that follow review some of the more suggestive aspects of Casal's eroticism and tentatively frame it with the explicit evidence of a homosexual subculture flourishing in fin de siècle Havana.

Evidence of such a culture is found in two treatises dealing with prostitution and homosexuality in Havana around 1890. The first, *La prostitución en La Habana*, is a sociomedical treatise published by Dr. Benjamín Céspedes in 1888. The second treatise, an attack on Céspedes and his work, was published a year later by Pedro Giralt with the odd title of *El amor y la prostitución. Réplica a un libro del Dr. Céspedes* [Love and Prostitution. Reply to a Book by Dr. Céspedes]. The two treatises, a pseudo-scientific study and its moralizing response, very likely provoked a *crónica* published by Casal in *La Discusión* on 28 December 1889.<sup>2</sup> Casal's *crónica*, "A través de la ciudad. El centro de dependientes" [Throughout the City. The Cen-

ter for Store Clerks] describes a visit to a residence for store clerks, one of the places of homosexual activity discussed in the treatises. The treatises in question outline a portrait of queer Havana that frames Casal's *crónica* and that may enrich, or even taint, a literary persona long frozen in aesthetic isolation.<sup>3</sup>

Questions concerning Casal's sexuality rose almost as soon as he began publishing, and comments about the peculiar eroticism of his work became a commonplace of literary histories; yet the relationship between the two has remained obscure, or at best oblique. Obscurity and obliqueness are not necessarily undesirable, though repeated references to the mystery surrounding Casal's sexuality have gone hand in hand with a canonization of his text as a brilliant, though marginal and unique parcel of *Modernismo's* cultural monument. A tentative, perhaps controversial, and certainly provisional turn from that monument is in order. Suppose that the monument occupies Havana's main promenade around 1889; and in the evening, when the music plays, out come the queers, "*maricones*" and their "clients," marginal types who seem to circle the monolithic monument.

Any mention or allusion to Casal's sexuality has always carried the implication that it was not only aberrant in some way or other but radically unique. Whatever Casal was, he was the only one; it follows, or so the argument suggests, that Casal's work is at once brilliant and anomalous. Casal's secret is his alone. The founding gesture of homosexual panic, evident in the critical writings about Casal, is not really intolerance (Casal is admired for his poetic gifts etc.), but isolation: Casal is different, unique, as a poet and as an individual. The sexuality of Casal's body not only does not have a name but it is reduced to the category of the anomalous and the isolated. The psychological vocabulary used in a great deal of criticism (repression, sense of guilt, abnormality), has contributed to that isolation. Yet, independent of Casal, removed from the complex metaphoric web where illness, sexual preference, and literary production shift vertiginously to produce various readings, what was it like to be queer in Havana around 1890? If it is impossible, and perhaps unnecessary or undesirable, to out Casal (the hard evidence is certainly missing), it does seem pertinent to people the dreary isolation of his sexuality with other bodies, with some background noise as it were, provided by so-called hustlers, drag queens, pretty boys, and their bourgeois clients.

The frequent comments about the peculiarities of Casal's textual eroticism, and the sexuality that seems to nurture it, have gone hand in hand with a characteristic flight into what may be called the more readable, and more palatable, side of his "nature" and his writing, that is to say, his

"Nihilismo" and his "Neurosis," the titles of two of his best-known poems, which have been read as a rather narrow aesthetic credo, or more radically still, as the definitive expression of a vital ideology.<sup>4</sup> Along these same lines, Casal's tropical *mal de siècle* is somehow justified by his early death from an illness seemingly willed by the poet, a fitting ending for a morbid trinity of "isms": exoticism, eroticism, pessimism.

Whether well-intentioned or apologetic, Casal's first readers reveal a peculiar version of homosexual panic.<sup>5</sup> One of the most explicit versions of this panic, though not the only one, may be found in the portrait written by a contemporary of Casal, writer and polemist Manuel de la Cruz (1861–96). In the portrait written by De la Cruz for his *Cromitos cubanos* [Cuban Sketches], the contrast between a desired virility and Casal's ambiguous interior, the place of culture but also of abnormality and neurosis, is explicit.<sup>6</sup> Casal's often quoted definition of the modern writer as a "neurótico sublime, o un nihilista, o un blasfemo, o un desesperado" [a sublime neurotic, or a nihilist, or a blasphemer, or a desperado] deliberately and forcefully inverts the terms of national virility spelled out by De la Cruz.<sup>7</sup> Casal's rather militant swerving from a virile national discourse is backed by European models yet remains no less nationalistic, however peculiarly so. Nevertheless, the charges of De la Cruz and others have stuck; Casal's self-sublimation of neurosis has remained isolated and anomalous and for that reason perfectly coherent with *Modernismo's* parcelling of the aesthetic and correlative professionalization of the writer.<sup>8</sup>

Yet such parcelling, however historically justified, seems to dampen the impact of Casal's neurotic sublime version of the writer, aesthetic in the etymological sense of the word, still touching the emotions and the senses, certainly mine at any rate. In a visit to one of the Centers for Clerks, accused of sheltering explicit homosexual practices, Casal, the neurotic sublime of his own definition of the artist, brushes what was on the streets of Havana at the time he wrote, c. 1890: that is, a full-blown queer culture, violently pushed to the edge by the scientific and moralizing discourses of professionals and pamphleteers, some of whom also doubled as readers of Casal and arbiters of culture in the emerging republic. Before taking it to the streets, so to speak, a brief aside on queer theory is in order.

Max Nordau, the popularizer of a homophobic version of decadence, wanted artistic representations to come into the "bright focal circle of consciousness" (61). By contrast, queer theory, because it flees, like Blanche at the bowling alley, from the merciless glare of such a cruel metaphor, may produce hazy results. Queer theory is "fuzzily defined, undercoded, or discursively dependent on more established forms" (Lauretis iii). Paradoxi-

cally, richly so one must add, Spanish American *modernismo* partakes of a double coincidence: on the one hand, it coincides with the development of nationalistic cultures, "ostensibly grounded in 'natural' heterosexual love" and marriage (Sommer 6); on the other hand, *Modernismo* may be said to be the founding moment of Spanish American literary queerness, inasmuch as an "against the grain," often willful marginality comes to be a part, if not the central part, of the new aesthetic, rejected by the likes of Manuel de la Cruz and embraced by Casal. The queer "revels in the discourse of the loathsome, the outcast, the idiomatically proscribed position of same-sex desire," the queer "attacks the dominant notion of the natural, is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (Case 3). At one point or another, so were most *modernistas*, but when the winds of homophobia blew their way, they lay their cards on the table and beat a hasty retreat; hence the other side of *Modernismo*, the cure, the antidote, the healing of the wound of European decadence, one of whose secrets was a newly named "perversion": homosexuality.

Casal was born in Havana in 1863, the son of a well-to-do Spanish immigrant and a Cuban woman of Irish and Spanish descent. By the time he was ten, whatever remained of what according to his biographers must have been a rather pleasant childhood was wiped out. 1868, the same year Casal's mother died, also marks the beginning of the first war for Cuban independence, ten years of battles and skirmishes that devastated the Cuban countryside; before the war ended, the father's business, and Casal's patrimony, lay in ruins. These biographical misfortunes form an anecdotal core used by generations of readers to anchor the recurring themes of physical decadence and moral defeat. Thus physical and spiritual exhaustion becomes the referent of what may be called the weariness of representation, the other side of creative desire, a commonplace of artistic modernity and certainly one of the salient characteristics of *Modernismo*.<sup>9</sup> The representation of the *mal de siècle* in *modernista* texts is frequently associated with the erotic, remarkably so in the work of Casal, whose erotic drift is backed by a vaguely defined sexual deviance, ambiguously though insistently named, and by illness. The pairing of sexual deviance and illness is of course common in the medicolegal systems worked out during the second half of the nineteenth century. Casal's case exemplifies the homophobic slant of discourses about sexuality and nationalism adapted to the Cuban situation: illness triumphs as a referent (Casal dies before his thirtieth birthday), while sexual deviance or uncertainty are eclipsed, though never silenced, becoming Casal's open secret.<sup>10</sup>

It is true that Casal's death was as dramatic as it was premature, seem-

ingly staged like so many things about him, his room, his impoverished dandyism, the settings of his poems, and of course his elegant writing style. Having recovered from an almost deadly bout of high fevers, the result of a vaguely diagnosed lung ailment, Casal attended a soiree at a friend's house. Between puffs of his cigarette, a telling prop for a man in cigar-smoking Cuba, certainly so in 1893, he laughed at a joke, and the laughter turned into a vomit of blood that stained the white shirt front: a kind friend removed the still burning cigarette from Casal's fingers. The pose of the laughing smoker, vaguely erotic like everything about Casal, wedded to a horrible death, has become part of his literary legend: Eros meets Thanatos in the tropical night. Yet in the hands of his first critics, the force of Thanatos won out as if Casal had been meant to die, and somehow his death justified all of his poetry; he was "enamored of Thanatos," wrote Darío.<sup>11</sup> Whatever his sexual orientation, Casal's famous illness eclipses and in a sense excuses whatever deviance might have lurked in the lurid images of his writing. The reading of Casal's death as a predetermined aesthetic consequence of his writing is commonplace. There is no question that illness and imminent death are sources of imagery for Casal's poetry and prose, but the creative energy to bring this about must not be slighted. However, in the hands of friends and critics, the so-called morbid aspect of Casal's literary persona has been bound in the straitjacket of biographical causality, succeeding all too well in setting Casal and his work in a barren field, however exotic and attractive it might be.

Subsequent generations of critics would refer to the mystery of Casal's sexuality, ever veiled and ever suggestive of death. The tortured yet dazzling eroticism of Julián del Casal's writing is inevitably associated by an entrenched critical tradition with the mystery of that sexuality, repressed, death-driven, certainly neurotic. The evident culture-building aspect of his erotic literary representations is thus masked, and such a mask, or rather pall, enshrines Casal among the *modernistas* and at the same time robs him, and us, of an empowering legacy. A hundred years after Casal's death, the devastating reality of AIDS is made more bearable, and culturally more fruitful, when that legacy is appropriated, when its queer aspects are allowed to mirror, however speculatively, our own predicament. The web of lies generated by AIDS is countered by a rereading of Casal that would deliberately blur the traditional image of Casal as a rather marginal, however significant, *modernista*. This cultural speculation is what queer theory and, as far as I am concerned, what queer identity are about: to be permitted a cultural presence, to be subjects, however illusory that position might

be, of culture rather than the objects of various attempts, old as the word "homosexuality" itself and as recent as the latest weekly rag, to find the causes of our so-called deviance.

In spite of the secret character of Casal's sexuality, references to it are plentiful; yet they are also repetitive, oscillating between the writer's biography and his work, both of which feed on and feed the secret of Casal's sexual identity, or more properly perhaps, his sexual orientation, either homosexuality or a quasi-masochistic asceticism. Max Nordau's famous definition of "degeneration" lurks in many of the comments made by Casal's early critics, not necessarily because they had read Nordau's treatise, which was published in 1892, but because they share the same sources, that is the naming and parceling of sexuality that is one of the strongest branches of scientific positivism.<sup>12</sup> In his biography of Casal, Emilio de Armas gives a summary of the question of sexuality in the legend about Casal. Referring to Casal's secret, Emilio de Armas writes, "sus amigos solían hablar de él en el tono de quienes comparten un secreto de iniciados" [his friends would speak about him in the hushed tones of those who share the secret of the initiates].<sup>13</sup> Casal's secret is "la extraña cosa / que te deje el alma helada" [the strange thing that will chill your soul] of his poem "Rondeles" [*Rondeaux*] which begins thus: "De mi vida misteriosa, / tétrica y desencantada, / oirás contar una cosa / que te deje el alma helada" [About my life, disenchanted, mysterious, and somber, you will hear something that may chill your soul].<sup>14</sup>

Another Casal critic, Mario Cabrera Saqui, writes apologetically that the poet was "un supertímido por la exagerada diferenciación de su instinto varonil, un tímido superior de la categoría de Amiel" (273) [a supertimid because of the exaggerated differentiation of his masculine instinct, a superior timid on the order of Amiel]. According to Carmen Poncet, Casal was "un tipo psicológicamente intersexual" [a psychologically intersexual type], one of those individuals possessing "un mecanismo sexual perfecto; pero que frecuentemente se inhiben por la falsa conciencia que experimentan de su capacidad" (35-40) [a perfect sexual mechanism, but who are inhibited by the false awareness they have of their abilities]. In other words, Casal had the right equipment but was afraid to use it, that is, afraid to use it as a heterosexual. It is certainly remarkable that Professor Poncet was able to assess the perfection of Casal's "sexual mechanism" nearly fifty years after his death. According to Argentine scholar José María Monner Sans, the issue should be closed; it is too complicated, he writes somberly, full of anecdotes and episodes. The stage is thus set for a safe, and not altogether

unhasty, return to the text, to the representations of sexuality, enlightened or obscured as the case might be, by the secret in question. Thus any reading that mentions or skirts, as is often the case, the question of sexuality in Casal, or more properly the question of its textual representations, is predetermined by the ambiguous character of Casal's open secret. Certainly, its very ambiguity is one of the strands in Casal's work that still crackles and sears with the peculiar energy that went into its making. In Casal's case, temporarily turning from the text will hardly lead to the solving of a back fence riddle but rather will enrich an inexorable and desired return. So a detour is in order, a cruise around the square: it's 1889 and what's doing in Havana?

As it emerges in the writing of the day, treatises, newspaper stories, and literary texts, Havana was a busy, somewhat ragged, colonial capital, as cosmopolitan perhaps as much larger Latin American cities, but certainly limited in the geographical as well as the cultural sense of the word; it must have been, and still is, a hard city to get totally lost in. I know that Casal went by those same squares and sidewalks where men and women cruised. I cannot affirm, or deny, whether he rejected that marginal space or if he simply crossed the street, but in order to deal with what Lezama Lima called "el quitasol de un inmenso Eros" [the umbrella of a huge Eros] in his "Ode to Julián del Casal," in order to share the verses that say "Nuestro escandaloso cariño te persigue" [Our scandalous love pursues you], that transform the secret and the punishment woven around Casal's sexuality into erotic sympathy, the presence of those others must be mentioned, those who cruised the periphery of Havana's squares.

The "problem" of homosexuality in the city is discussed in a chapter on male prostitution in Benjamín Céspedes's *La prostitución en La Habana*; Pedro Giralt deals with the topic throughout his irate reply, *El amor y la prostitución*. A useful aspect of the two works is their explicit vocabulary. At the same time, a series of complex metaphoric twists run from the body and its "sexually transmitted diseases" to the city and the national question, the question of the day among Cuban intellectuals. By contrast, in Casal's *crónica*, while vaguely but almost certainly alluding to one of the treatises, the relationship among the young clerks is described exclusively in terms of friendship and fraternity not of course in sexual terms. The rather elaborate description of the main room of the residence takes up almost half of the brief article. Casal's version shows the nature of the censorship in the press where he published much of his works or perhaps the limits that the writer imposed on himself. It also shows that the sublimation at work in the *crónica*, rather than merely repressive, is also fruitfully subjective:

in other words, self-sublimation is also self-representation, a cultural practice that is subtly yet powerfully opposed to the insistent objectivity of the scientific and political treatises that deal with the clerks' deviant sexuality.

If Dr. Céspedes discusses sexuality from the point of view of a physician and sociologist, Giralt replies by condemning the moral implication of such an analysis. Both consider the body of the homosexual as the grotesque referent of a number of maladies. In his prologue to the Céspedes book, Enrique José Varona, an early Casal critic and one of the most prominent literary and political figures of the day, praises it because "nos invita a acercarnos a una mesa de disección, a contemplar al desnudo úlceras cancerosas, a descubrir los tejidos atacados por el virus" (xi) [it invites us to approach a dissecting table, to gaze at the exposed cancerous sores, to discover the tissues attacked by the virus]. Varona prefaces the doctor's sociomedical treatise by deploying the prestigious metaphor of social disorder as illness; he moves seamlessly from the tissues on the doctor's table to the city: in both cases dissection is not only useful but necessary because pointing out the locus of disease somehow marks the beginning of the healing process.

The distancing maneuvers are significant, and Dr. Céspedes uses a common device: he did not himself examine the young pederast; he is merely reporting on the examination conducted by an anonymous learned colleague. In a chapter titled "La prostitución masculina" [Male Prostitution], there is a detailed description of the city's queer underworld. The following paragraph presents a fundamental definition of homosexuality, an "aberration" that is repeatedly compared to prostitution, in other words, not the aberration of an individual or a group of individuals, but a highly socialized phenomenon that threatens the rest of the populace:

Y aquí en la Habana, desgraciadamente, subsisten con más extensión de lo creíble y con mayor impunidad que en lugar alguno, tamañas degradaciones de la naturaleza humana; tipos de hombres que han invertido su sexo para traficar con estos gustos bestiales, abortos de la infamia que pululan libremente, asqueando a una sociedad que se pregunta indignada, ante la invasión creciente de la plaga asquerosa; si abundando tanto pederasta, habrán también aumentado los clientes de tan horrendos vicios. (190)

[And unfortunately here in Havana, there subsist, more extensively than one may believe and with greater impunity than anywhere else, enormous degradations of human nature; types of men who have inverted their sex in order to traffic in bestial desires, abortions of infamy teeming freely among us, revolting our society, which facing the

growing invasion of such a disgusting plague, asks with outrage if the abundance of so many pederasts does not also signal an increase in the number of clients for such horrible vices.]

Dr. Céspedes comments on the relationship between homosexuals and prostitutes, but much more disturbing is the presence of the so-called clients, suggesting the sort of exchange that has transformed the capital "en una de esas ciudades sodomíticas [into one of those sodomitic cities] an insular version of decadent Rome. The doctor divides pederasts into three groups: "el negro, el mulato y el blanco" [negroes, mulattos, and whites]. Classifying is of course a way to insist on scientific objectivity and to distance the observer from a supposedly marginal group that nevertheless appears to be spread throughout the entire city: "repartidos en todos los barrios de la Habana" [spread throughout all the neighborhoods of Havana]. Like prostitutes or vampires, "por la noche se estacionan en los puntos más retirados del Parque y sus alrededores más solitarios" [at night they stake out the periphery of the Square and its more isolated surroundings]. There follows a description of the "effeminate pederast," also archetypal. It could apply to decadent Rome or to the New York of tomorrow:

Durante las noches de retreta circulan libremente confundidos con el público, llamando la atención, no de la policía, sino de los concurrentes indignados, las actitudes grotescamente afeminadas de estos tipos que van señalando cínicamente las posaderas erguidas, arqueados y ceñidos los talles, y que al andar con menudos pasos de arrastre, se balancean con contoneos de mujer coqueta. Llevan flequillos en la frente, carmín en el rostro y polvos de arroz en el semblante, ignoble y fatigado de los más y agraciado en algunos. El pederasta responde a un nombre de mujer en la jerga del oficio. (191)

[When the band plays in the evening, they walk about freely, mingling with the populace; the grotesquely effeminate gestures of these types call the attention, not of the police, but of the outraged gathering; they walk cynically showing off their prominent buttocks, their waist arched and cinched, walking with small, mincing steps, swaying this way and that like a flirtatious woman. They wear bangs on their foreheads, rouge and rice powder on their face, ignoble and worn for the most part yet charming among some others. In the slang of their trade, pederasts go by a woman's name.]

The repulsion that one is asked to feel before the archetypal stereotype of the effeminate homosexual is undermined by the mention of the charming faces among them. Dr. Céspedes goes on to say that some of them have a favorite lover and that they celebrate parties among themselves, where they "mimic" (*fingen*) births and baptisms. From the point of view of the doctor, this mimicking of heterosexuality at its most "natural," birth, and its most sacred, baptism, is particularly repellent.<sup>15</sup> Following the lead of nineteenth-century sociology, particularly echoing Lombroso's physiognomically typed offenders, the doctor links homosexual behavior with criminality and disease; yet because of his scientific objectivity, he avoids making an explicit moral judgment, adding that "no siempre son pasivos en sus relaciones sexuales" [they are not always passive in their sexual relations] and sometimes "se prestan a ser activos" [lend themselves to an active role]. Dr. Céspedes's description proves that the practice of homosexual acts, at least among men in late-nineteenth-century Havana, was a relatively public, fully socialized affair. The fact that such practices are never mentioned, never explicitly so at any rate, by Casal, or any of the writers grouped around the journal *La Habana Elegante*, only confirms the transgressive character of such practices and the need to keep them secret, that is to say unwritten about except in sociomedical treatises. It is important to point out that the dominant strategy of suppression is to keep homosexuality out of written texts not classified as legal or medical, which is to say to keep it out of literature. By contrast, as will be seen in the comments on Giralt's response to Dr. Céspedes, homosexuality, particularly as it affected the relationship between the urban elite and the working classes, was the talk of the town.

The "vice" described by Dr. Céspedes has another privileged location, the communal residences of young apprentices and clerks, many of them recent arrivals from Spain. The chapter on male prostitution concludes with the report of an interview with a young clerk, approximately fifteen years of age, who visits the doctor because he says he may be "dañado por dentro" [hurt inside]. The doctor tells him he has a "chancro infectante sífilítico," an [infectious, syphilitic sore] and then goes on to describe the boy: "noté lo afeminado de su rostro, tan agraciado como el de cualquier mujer, y lo redondo y mórbido de sus formas de adolescente" [I noticed his effeminate face, as charming as that of any woman, and the morbid roundness of his adolescent body], "mórbido" of course in the double sense of "soft and delicate" and "diseased or causing disease." The word is one of the key adjectives of the various discourses on decadence and signals illness as

well as "erotomania" and "egomania," Nordau's double-headed *bête noire*.

The interview with the boy reveals another aspect of the queer life of the period. In the residence for clerks where he lives, some of the men caress him and "hacían conmigo ciertos manejos" [they did certain things with me]. "Con casi todos" [with most of them], he admits. The boy then says that they hit him ("me pegaban") and goes on to say that the men "me besaban y me cogían de la mano y yo tenía que hacerles" [they kissed me and they took my hand and I had to do it with them or to them]. Among the faceless "all of them," there is a remarkable exception. The boy says that "Habían [*sic*] dos que dormían juntos, pero a esos se les miraba con más respeto" [There were two who slept together, and they were looked upon with more respect]. The gay boy is abused by men whose sexual identity is not in question because their sexually active role simultaneously ratifies their heterosexuality and masks the evident homosexuality of their acts. In this violent setting, the boy's mention of two men who slept together, and were thus respected as a couple, is remarkably moving. Faced with what must have been the daunting authority of the doctor, this nameless boy manages to point to a homosexual role model, as if to add its worth to the doctor's scientific diagnosis. In other words, in the interview with the doctor, quoted verbatim by Dr. Céspedes and probably conducted by him in the first place, the references to the grotesque and the sick are countered by the respect of a group of men for a gay couple who slept together. As for the person in charge of the residence, he is as indifferent as the police and "con tal de no aflojar dinero, en lo demás no se mete en esas cosas feas" (194) [as long as he didn't have to shell out any money, he didn't get mixed up in those ugly things], which suggests the relative tolerance toward the sexual practices in the residence.

Though referring only to "pederasty," Dr. Céspedes reproduces the two fundamental aspects of the original definition of homosexuality:<sup>16</sup> on the one hand, it is a disease with identifiable symptoms, especially when the body, as in the case of the boy in the interview, is marked by "sores" etc.; on the other hand, as the corporal metaphor broadens its scope, it is a social disease that "infects" the rest of the healthy political body, the same metaphoric slippage harrowingly at work in current AIDS phobia. The somatic metaphors have an evident source in the boy's body; but even before the interview, such anthropomorphic metaphors are applied to the city, in the same way that they are applied to the decadent aspects of Casal's work. In the description of queer life in Havana, the metaphoric web deployed by the doctor, and by Varona in his prologue, is at one with the epistemology of the period. It is in fact the common denominator of discourses dealing

with illness and homosexuality, as well as with various symbolic practices, specifically literature, which is decadent when it favors "external adornment," Nordau's expression, in short when it does not signify clearly. Nordau repeatedly refers to the decadents' failure to grasp "the phenomenon of the universe" (266) and to their obsession with form and ornament, which are supposedly devoid of meaning. This is the crux of Varona's founding, extremely influential, criticism of Casal's work: too precious for its own good and certainly not good for the republic, neither the culturally sound Cuban republic of letters nor the yet-to-be-founded political republic.

Dr. Céspedes locates homosexuality between disease and symbolic practice. Pederasts are depraved beings, marked by the symptoms of disease. They also mimic the social behavior that defined "woman" at the time, particularly woman as prostitute: they wear makeup and sway as they walk.<sup>17</sup> The setting described by Dr. Céspedes is absolutely marginal. Homosexuals live in dens, and although they cruise the heart of the city, they confine themselves to the periphery of its square and to the late evening hours. Dr. Céspedes's pederasts are marginal not only because of their sexual preference but because of their social class, which he hastens to define by lumping together career criminals, "dirty alcoholics," and hairdressers and "maids" of prostitutes. The clerks of the guild residences are foreigners for the most part and dangerously close to the class in question; besides, the doctor asserts, their living conditions tend to foster aberrant same-sex practices. Except in the passing, though alarmed, mention of the clients, the class of intellectuals and professionals, such as the doctor himself, is beyond the reach of the marginal group, thus reified in the name of science and presented as an object of study, a monstrosity in a natural history museum. The nature of the solution finally offered by the doctor is neither moral nor psychological, but social: "mancebos célibes" [celibate young men] should not be lodged in phalansteries, where the absence of women must lead them to "incontinencia bestial entre hombres" (195) [bestial incontinence among men].

Dr. Céspedes's *La prostitución en La Habana* had an almost immediate answer. The year after the study's publication Pedro Giralt y Alemán published *El amor y la prostitución. Réplica a un libro del Dr. Céspedes* [Love and Prostitution. Reply to a Book by Dr. Céspedes]. Giralt defends the virility of the clerks and accuses Dr. Céspedes of being an anti-European charlatan. Giralt's book unwittingly broadens the scope of homosexuality in the colonial capital. He rants about the "vices" of the bourgeoisie and the professional classes, specifically the *criollo* class. According to Giralt, the doctor is "hombre vulgarísimo y completamente inepto para especular seriamente

en los altos y sublimes principios de la Ciencia [a most vulgar man, totally inept for the serious study of the lofty, sublime principles of Science]. He goes on to say that the doctor has blamed an entire social group for the isolated defects of one individual, namely the young boy interviewed by the doctor (83). In his angry pamphlet, Giralt attacks the "fanaticism of *criollismo*," because he believes that the doctor has suggested that prostitution and homosexuality are European vices that have contaminated the island's national aspirations. In other words, barely five years before the second war of independence, Cuban nationalists or *criollistas* wrongly blame Europe, specifically a hated Spain, for the queering of the capital, so goes Giralt's argument. Giralt's name-calling defense merely turns the table: you Cubans, especially bourgeois professionals, are the queers, not the poor immigrant boys trying to survive in their new home, even if such survival means an occasional sexual transaction with one of the hated clients, the real villains in Giralt's diatribe.<sup>18</sup>

Giralt's argument has no rhyme or reason, but his vigorous mudslinging is enlightening. He drags the doctor's scientific study into the debate about nationalism that was the order of the day. Giralt turns his ire not on the pederasts but on their clients, who are not clerks but *criollo* members of the urban elite:

¿Cómo calificaremos, pues, a estos pederastas activos y *paganos* que van o iban a solicitar a los *maricones* para *ocuparlos* pagándoles con dinero? No obstante estos, más culpables que los *pasivos*, no han sido deportados, y se están paseando por las calles de la Habana. ¿Serán dependientes? ¡Ah, si se pudiera decir ciertas cosas que la vergüenza pública prohíbe revelar; si fuera lícito contar con nombres y apellidos ciertas historias íntimas y secretas cuyos detalles se cuentan *sotto voce* por los corrillos; las confidencias de algunas mujeres a sus comadres y de éstas a sus íntimos, aparecerían a la luz del sol con toda su repugnante fealdad más de cuatro entes, al parecer bien educados, que llevan levita y ocupan señalados puestos. (emphasis in the original, 83–85)

[How should we label these active, pagan pederasts who pursue these queers in order to pay them for their services? They are more to blame than the *passive* ones, yet they have not been deported, and they walk the streets of Havana with impunity. Are they clerks? Oh, if only one could say certain things that public decency forbids us to reveal, if it were lawful to name certain names, and certain intimate, secret stories whose details are told *sotto voce* here and there, what women whisper to their friends (*comadres*), and what these in turn whisper to others,

the repugnant ugliness of more than one apparently well-educated so-and-so, who wears coat and tie and goes to a respectable job, would be forced into the light of day.]

Giralt is up on the latest back-fence gossip in colonial Havana, and he wants nothing less than to out the professional *criollos*, whose vice is that much more repugnant because they practice it out of choice not out of need, as do some of the poor boys described by the doctor. As opposed to Dr. Céspedes's attempts to sound scientific, Giralt is refreshingly explicit in his pamphleteering: the people in question are queers, "*maricones*." His comments reveal that homosexuality was not at all marginal; what makes a homosexual marginal is his class, not his sexual preference. The less fortunate ones, those from the working classes, are deported to the Isle of Pines, but their clients stroll about freely because their good name, their education, in short their social class, the class of those who "wear a frock coat and occupy distinguished posts," protect them. Giralt's defense of "the honest, suffering class of store clerks" suggests the breadth and complexity of homosexual and homosocial practices in the Havana of 1889.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, if Giralt's challenge to Céspedes's scientific authority is chaotic and illogical, it also rejects the body of the boy examined by the doctor as the source of an ambiguous metaphoric web and transforms the question of homosexuality into a sociopolitical contrast between classes: on the one hand, the working classes, in this case made up for the most part of recently arrived Spanish immigrants; on the other, the local professional bourgeoisie, which controlled the local press and, as did Casal, often directed more or less veiled attacks at the colonial authorities.

Casal's *crónica*, "A través de la ciudad, El Centro de Dependientes" [Throughout the City. The Center for Store Clerks] was published under the pseudonym of Hernani on 28 December 1889; it was written after a visit to the Center, located on the top floors of the building that housed the Albizu theater. The Center was one of many *centros*, *liceos* and *colonias*, social and residential guilds that spread throughout the island for the purpose of housing the newly arrived work force and in many cases teaching various skills to its members. Casal describes the conditions that drove the young men to abandon their homeland, the effort of their toil and the way in which many of them are integrated into Cuban society. The Center's secretary guides the visitor through the various rooms, which compose a true phalanstery with reading halls and classrooms, where the members have free access to the curriculum of a business school.

Céspedes's book was published in 1888, and Giralt's the following year.

Casal returned from a brief stay in Madrid, his only travel outside of Cuba, during January 1889. It is highly improbable that he did not know of the two books, one of them with a prologue by the prominent Enrique José Varona, who was to write reviews of Casal's own books.<sup>20</sup> More than likely, Casal was given the assignment of writing a *crónica* for *La Discusión* in order to smooth over the debate between *criollos* and *peninsulares*, that is between pro-independence nationalists and supporters of Spanish rule. Giralt's attack on Dr. Céspedes had dragged the thorny issue of sexual deviance into the debate, and Casal's *crónica* must also gloss over the allegations about the clerks' sexual practices.

Casal writes that he is driven by curiosity; he wants to gather "los datos que reclamaba nuestra insaciable curiosidad" (2:18) [the facts required by our insatiable curiosity]. It is unlikely that a mere residence for clerks would have provoked much curiosity, certainly not an "insatiable curiosity." The gossip about the two pamphlets and the sexual doings of the clerks and their so-called clients must have been the topic of conversation in what is still a rather chatty, extroverted city. Significantly however, Casal's curiosity for the facts leads to silence. Unlike other *crónicas* where the subjective reaction of the writer is almost immediately present, the *crónica* about the Center reads more like a reporter's account of the scene of a crime. The Center is absolutely empty, except for the neutral presence of its secretary, a hazily outlined third party.

In order to show that the lurid details mentioned by the boy interviewed in *La prostitución en La Habana* are not the norm, Giralt refers to the "strict discipline" maintained at the Centers and to the fact that "está prohibido hablar de política" [it is forbidden to talk about politics]. Casal almost quotes Giralt when he writes that at the Center "está permitido hablar de todo menos de política" [one may speak about anything except politics], and he goes on to describe the love among the young men in terms of sympathy and friendship:

¿No es más agradable comunicarse sus ensueños de riqueza y sus proyectos para lo porvenir? ¿No es más bello recordar la patria lejana, donde se ha pasado la infancia y donde hay seres queridos que nos aguardan? De este modo ¿no se obtiene más pronto el fin apetecido, que es el de estrechar cada día más los lazos de cariño, simpatía y amistad entre los dependientes? (2:19)

[Is it not more agreeable for them to share their dreams of wealth and their projects for the future? Is it not more beautiful to remember the distant homeland, the place of their childhood, where there are loved

ones awaiting us? This way, is not the cherished goal more quickly obtained, that is, to bind more strongly the ties of love, sympathy and friendship among the clerks?]

If the doctor pointed to the sores in the boy's ass, a clear sign of the activities at the Centro, Casal sentimentalizes the relationships among the men who live there. On the one hand, one may recall the respect for the couple who slept together, mentioned by the boy, and the possibility of sentimentalizing such a relationship, in other words, of placing it beyond the doctor's scientific hold; on the other hand, one should point to the strong current of sentimentality in *Modernismo*, a version of the tradition of sensibility rooted in the eighteenth century and later exemplified by Spanish poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and French poet François Coppée, both admired by the *modernistas*.

*Modernismo's* tradition of sentimentalism retreated before its ultimately triumphant formalism, the good side of *Modernismo*, bequeathed to the various avant-gardes. Yet in the homophobic setting of fin de siècle Havana, sentimentalism, rather than just quaintly maudlin, may be a strategy of survival; oblique, sentimental appeals to the reader defer self-representation and the representation of others, and this deferral is both our loss and our gain. On the one hand, Casal's unwillingness or inability to deal frontally with his sexuality and that of the clerks robs us, queers of today, of a potentially empowering legacy; on the other, the sentimentalism and deliberate pathos that at times characterize his style must be considered in the context of other representational strategies that have fared better in the critical tradition, namely, his unquestionable formal mastery. As queer readers, our task may be to superimpose loss and gain, to find our identity not only in the affirmative proclamation of same-sex desire but also in its various disguises: in the sentimental appeals to the reader as well as in the fabulously masked, exotically draped, richly embossed *modernista* image brilliantly created by Casal, the Helen of his *museo* to linger briefly on just one: "Envuelta en veste de opalina gasa, / recamada de oro . . . indiferente a lo que en torno pasa, / mira Elena hacia el lívido horizonte, / irguiendo un lirio en la rosada mano" (1:118) [Wrapped in a vestment of opalescent gauze, / embroidered in gold . . . indifferent to what is happening around her, / Helen looks toward the livid horizon, / raising a lily in her rosy hand].

If in the poetry, the image of the draped, ambiguously sexed body triumphs, in Casal's *crónica* about the store clerks, the body of the boy in the doctor's interview, with its sores, but also with its "morbid" shape and attractive face, disappears. Yet Casal's other *crónicas*, as well as his poetry and

fiction, teem with bodies, arabesque of sores at the doctor's office, flying bodies at the circus, the lapidary flesh of the heroes in the museum. At the circus, the body of an acrobat becomes a "símbolo viviente," a "living symbol" in a remarkable slippage between choreography and writing. In Casal's *museo* an ever-present erotic gaze seems to convulse the rigid statuary: Prometheus, "marmóreo, indiferente y solitario, / sin que brote el gemido de su boca" (1:116) [marmoreal, indifferent and solitary, / never a moan issuing from his mouth]; and Polyphemus, "mirando aquella piel color de rosa, / incendia la lujuria su ojo verde" (1:117) [gazing at that rosy skin, / lechery his green eye sets aflame]. By contrast, in the *crónica* about the Center, the emptiness of the place is remarkable. The clerks are lost in an abstract, bodiless plural as if the love, sympathy and friendship among them depended on their very absence, somehow compensated by an abundance of signifiers describing in detail the decorations of the interior, rather an interior within an interior, for the great hall contains "un teatrillo precioso, alegre como una pajarera y reluciente como una caja de juguetes" (2:19) [a precious little theater, happy as a bird cage and shining like a toy box]. The aesthetic reduction of the large hall is breathless, almost violent, as if to close itself off from the possible entrance of a body. In the broadest sense, such a reduction glosses over the bodies that were there. The eye is fixed on the ornamentation of the walls, decorated with *panneaux*, which in turn contain Venetian mirrors, draped and tasseled. In the middle of the great hall, perhaps peopled by the very young men who are the subjects of the two pamphlets, the roving eye and the subjectivity that it signals seem to seek refuge in that "precious little theater," in turn reduced first to a "bird cage" then to a "toy box." What cannot be named in the *crónica* is not only homosexuality or pederasty; it is the erotic body, which must be aesthetically transformed, which must be moved to another register. In other words, it must be represented in a different way, in other places, by its very absence in "a precious little theater," or by its contortions at the circus, frozen in the statuary of the *museo*, deformed by disease, transformed into a vision of terrible beauty set in privileged, distant, aesthetic places, that is, represented as symbolic sublimation, where any reading must inexorably return.<sup>21</sup>

That return to the text, however, is now tainted by the echo of those queers, drag queens, and clients of fin de siècle Havana, transformed into objects of study and scorn by the sociologist-doctor and the moralizing pamphleteer. The morbidity of a boy's body, radically distanced by the doctor, now echoes the morbidity of Casal's style, radically distanced by a critical tradition, always thought to possess a masterful upper hand and

certainly the last word when it comes to Casal. Little matter whether he so much as exchanged a greeting with the queers in Havana's main square. They inhabited his city and will lend their choral presence to any subsequent reading. Thus, though never fully open, the door to Casal's interior, to the transgressive nature of his eroticism, aesthetically distanced, deliberately veiled by the signifiers of draping and adornment, ever suggestive in its homoerotic imagery, is invitingly ajar.

## Notes

- 1 Bello, "Juicio sobre las obras poéticas de Don Nicasio Alvarez de Cienfuegos," *Obras completas* 9: 210.
- 2 *Prosas* 2:17–20. All subsequent references to Casal's *Prosas* will be given parenthetically. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. I thank Emilie Bergmann, whose comments were so helpful during the revision and rewriting of this paper. Part of my research on Casal has been funded by a grant from the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, whom I also thank.
- 3 Some critics, notably Cintio Vitier and Emilio de Armas, have sought to counteract the aesthetic marginality imposed on Casal: Vitier by affirming Casal's sincerity and the power of that very isolation; de Armas by reading Casal in the context of Cuba's oppressive political and cultural climate. Both approaches are illuminating, but they don't challenge the premise of isolation imposed on Casal's aestheticism, grounded on the commonplace that states that the "superficial" aspects of Casal's work and of *modernismo* inexorably lead to an aesthetic, and implicitly a moral, impasse.
- 4 "Read 'Nihilismo' and you will see how sincere was the poet's desire for death," writes Anderson Imbert in his influential *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* 206.
- 5 The term has been fruitfully reactivated by Sedgwick; Marjorie Garber points out that it was coined by Dr. Edward Kempf in 1920 "to describe the fear fostered by same-sex contiguity in army camps, prisons, monasteries, boarding schools" (137); and Centers for Clerks in fin de siècle Havana, one might add.
- 6 The contrast between Manuel de la Cruz's "virile," patriotic exterior and Casal's problematic, and implicitly deviant, interior is discussed by Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, "Patologizar el interior" 162–166. I thank Agnes for sending me a copy of her manuscript. The *modernista* interior as the autotelic place of luxury and pleasure is contrasted to the museum as the imposition of order over nature by Aníbal González 33ff.
- 7 Casal's definition is from his *busto* of José Fornaris (1827–90), *Prosas* 1:275–80; significantly, Fornaris was one of the founders of *Sibonismo*, the poetry of national affirmation, thrown in the face of colonial oppression. See Vitier's "Fifth Lesson," *Lo cubano en la poesía* 131–79.
- 8 On the parceling of the aesthetic in *Modernismo*, see Angel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* 164–71, and "El poeta frente a la modernidad," *Literatura y clase social* 78–143.
- 9 Akin to what Terry Eagleton calls Schopenhauer's "death of desire."
- 10 On the open secret in the context of the binary oppositions of the second half of the nineteenth century, see Sedgwick 67–90.

- 11 From Darío's prologue to the poems of Manuel Pichardo, quoted by Monner Sans 257–58.
- 12 If for Bataille eroticism is always transgressive, for Foucault it operates inexorably within the "machinery of power." As Casal's case suggests, however, it is perhaps less a question of a radical polarization between transgression and the powers that defuse it than a drift, Wilde's "to drift with every passion," taken from the early Pater. See Richard Ellman's introduction to *The Artist as Critic* ix–xviii.
- 13 The comments by De Armas summarize most of the critical references to a "conflict [in Casal] whose origin is sexual," although Casal's erotic life remains "draped in total darkness." See 32–41 of the sensitive, well-documented biography by De Armas.
- 14 *Rimas, The Poetry of Julián del Casal* 1:209. All subsequent references to this edition of Casal's poetry will be given parenthetically.
- 15 The role of such theatrics in the building of gay and lesbian culture is discussed by Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber, respectively.
- 16 On the development of the term "homosexuality," see Chauncey.
- 17 In the *Crónica Médico-Quirúrgica de la Habana* 16 (1890): 79–81, in a section titled "Pederasty in Havana," a Dr. Montané notes, as does Dr. Céspedes, that "pederasts" wear makeup and otherwise adorn themselves; he also mentions "their strange taste for perfumes and bright objects, their monomania for photographs, in which they appear [*en las que se hacen representar*] in theatrical costumes or in women's dresses." The doctor circulated "among the members of the Congress" he is addressing "some samples he was able to procure," seemingly of photographs, perhaps still kept in some archive in Havana. I am grateful to George Chauncey for the gift of a photocopy of the pages cited. For discussion of similar photographs in Argentina, see Jorge Salessi in this volume.
- 18 On active-passive roles in Mexico and Latin America, see Almaguer, and Murray and Dynes. Significantly, the ubiquitous and persistent active-passive pairing seems to be threatened by Dr. Céspedes's objectivity—not all were passive who seemed so, he says. Giralt, however, insists on it, though he damns the "active" ones more than their "victims."
- 19 The political implications of class divisions in the gay population of 1889 Havana are no less significant today and are particularly pertinent in a Latin American and Latino context. For a suggestive discussion of homosexuality and class among Chicano men and in contemporary Mexico, see Almaguer and Blanco, respectively.
- 20 Varona wrote a review of Casal's first book of poems, *Hojas al viento*, for *Revista Cubana* (May 1890), and a review of his second book, *Nieve*, for the same publication (August 1892). The first is included in *Prosas*, and both are included in *The Poetry of Julián del Casal*. Casal in turn dedicated one of his "*bustos*" to the formidable *homme de lettres*, who wrote a moving eulogy after Casal's death, also in *The Poetry of Julián del Casal*.
- 21 On Casal's *museo ideal* and on his visit to the circus, see my *Erotismo y representación en Julián del Casal* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1993).

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## THREE

### *Nationalisms, Ethnicities, and (Homo)sexualities*